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ABSTRACT

Most educators agree that an approach balanced between phonics and whole language is the best method of teaching beginning readers. Marie Carbo (1996) discusses the importance of focusing on a balanced approach to reading, because different students have different learning styles. Children who learn best with phonics instruction have analytic and auditory reading styles. Students who benefit most from the whole language program have visual, tactile, and global reading styles. Regie Routman, a strong advocate of the whole language approach, (1997) discusses the misinterpretation of teaching reading with the whole language approach. Whole language promotes phonics instruction in the context of real and predictable literature. A literature based reading program does not necessarily exclude phonics skills. It is generally accepted that phonics play a valuable part in any reading program. But even proponents of phonics agree that rote memorization and skills worksheets are boring to students, and, therefore, detrimental if given too much emphasis. Both approaches should be incorporated into reading instruction. The three stages of reading acquisition are (1) a selective cue stage, (2) a spelling-sound stage; and (3) an automatic stage. It is when students reach the spelling-sound stage that phonics instruction is crucial. Phonics skills, however, should be incorporated within a whole language program, which includes rich and exciting literature, so that students will develop a true love of the written word. (Contains seven references.) (CR)

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Phonics and Whole Language
Friends or Foes?

Jennifer N. Raven

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Teaching children to read is probably the most important lesson learned in the elementary grades. As a result, it is no surprise that the debate between whole language and phonics is a very emotional issue. What I consider to be ironic is that, in all of the research that I have completed, it seems like the proponents of whole language and the proponents of phonics are largely on the same team. It is no longer considered prudent to be on one side at the expense of the other. Rather, most educators agree that a balanced approach is the best method of teaching beginning readers. Maria Carbo (1996) discusses how the debate around teaching reading has pitted one side against the other to the detriment of the children. The real question that needs to be addressed is how do people best learn how to read?

Maria Carbo (1996) discusses the importance of focusing on a balanced approach to reading, as different students have different learning styles. Those children who learn best with phonics instruction have analytic and auditory reading styles. As a result, the logic of phonics makes sense to them. For an analytic learner, a program based exclusively on whole language can seem disjointed and haphazard. Conversely, those students who benefit most from a whole language program have visual, tactile, and global reading styles. These students enjoy the hands-on learning and the interesting literature to which they are exposed.

Maria Carbo concludes that to choose either whole language or phonics as the sole basis for a language-arts program does a great disservice to the children with different learning styles throughout the classroom. Her recommendation is for a balanced approach to

reading. A reading program should focus on literature and fun. Students should be read to often by the teacher and exposed to a print rich environment full of exciting books to examine or to read. According to the author, a teacher must be careful not to allow boredom to prevail in the teaching of phonics. This type of instruction should be limited to a few minutes per day and games should be included to keep the level of stress low. Teaching children the necessary skills to decode words while peaking their interest in reading and literature should go hand in hand in any reading program.

Regie Routman (1997) attempts to dispel the myths about the failure of whole language. After the California Department of Education adopted a language arts program that moved away from a skills-based approach, the pressure was on whole language to produce results. In 1994, the scores on the NAEP were terribly low and whole language became the scapegoat. Regie Routman points to other problems within the system that critics ignored at the expense of whole language. Such problems included inordinately large class sizes, low funding for education, and high numbers of students whose primary language was not English. The author also discusses the misinterpretations of this method of teaching reading. Whole language promotes phonics instruction in the context of real and predictable literature. A literature based reading program does not necessarily exclude phonics skills. In addition to a misinterpretation by the media, many educators also do not understand the methods involved in a whole language reading program. Some believe that if students are immersed in books they will learn to read as easily as they learned to speak. However, this is not the case and not the basis of whole language. Phonics has always played a role in this method of teaching reading.

Regie Routman has studied districts in the United States that have successfully adopted the whole language approach. These districts were successful for many reasons. When a new language arts program was introduced, the educators planned for the change. Teachers, facilitators and parents were educated before implementing the new program. It was especially important that parents understood that phonics skills would be a part of the program. Parents had to understand the logic behind whole language. Adequate resources were provided by the district for education and ongoing professional development.

At this point in the debate between whole language and phonics, it is generally accepted that phonics plays a valuable part in any reading program. However, in an article entitled "Learning and Using Phonics in Beginning Reading", the author argues that advocating phonics is not enough, one must be able to distinguish between the various phonics programs. According to the author, a phonics program should not take precedence over rich reading experiences and an educator should understand which skills should be taught at what time. Three stages of reading acquisition are described, a selective-cue stage, a spelling-sound stage and an automatic stage. It is when students reach the spelling-sound stage that phonics instruction is crucial. The teaching of phonics leads to phonemic awareness, which is necessary to pass through this stage and into reading fluency.

For proficient readers, the skills of phonics become almost second nature. Proficient readers find a greater enjoyment of reading because they are confident in their skills.

Such students can decode words rapidly and self-correct. Once readers reach this level of proficiency, their previous exposure to whole language becomes important. At this point in their education, students probably have developed an opinion about written work. Either they have had a lot of positive exposure to interesting literature and have developed a great love for books and reading, or they have had less positive experiences and are not interested in reading anything that is not required. I think that it is very important to develop a child's love of books and all written work early, long before they are actually able to read. As students become older and gain experience, they establish a different relationship with the written word. People develop interpretive strategies based on what they have learned from others in their community. These interpretive strategies allow individuals to be critical of what they are reading and to engage text rather than simply processing it. (Schraw, Bruning, 1996)

While the debate will continue to rage over whole language and phonics, it seems clear to me that a balanced approach is the best method to any reading program. I do not think that critics of either strategy are as far apart philosophically as they might appear to be. Proponents of whole language are quick to point out that phonics is a part of their approach to teaching reading. Proponents of phonics agree that rote memorization and skills worksheets are boring to students and, therefore, detrimental if given too much emphasis. Phonics skills should be incorporated within a whole language program, which includes rich and exciting literature, so that the students will develop a true love of the written word. I believe that a student's enthusiasm for reading is the most telling aspect of any reading approach and the best way to judge its failure or success.

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